

New York citizen of the year has long history with Jesuit-run retreat house

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Oct. 1, 2013 | Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Maureen Skelly has earned a reputation for longtime service at Mount Manresa, the Jesuit-run retreat house on Staten Island, N.Y.

Sr. Camille: What brought you to that ministry?

Skelly: I had hunger in my soul for more, and I saw that hunger in others. That hunger was God, drawing me to share with others. What better place at that time than Manresa Jesuit Retreat House in Staten Island.

What were your responsibilities there?

I began in 1977 as a part-time director for women's retreats while I still worked at the methadone clinic in Elmhurst Hospital. At the hospital, I counseled clients who were on methadone, then became the clinic's supervisor.

Was there a connection between counseling people on drugs and those on a spiritual quest?

Yes. Prior to my hospital work, I taught theology as an adjunct professor at St. John's University and music at Queens College. It was my experience at Queens College that led me to the methadone clinic. Citywide budget cuts led to the closing of its music department; however, one of my students thought I would be an asset to the Elmhurst Hospital's drug clinic. Because her husband was comptroller of that hospital, I considered her insight a gift from God to me. I learned all about drugs and received a professional diploma in rehabilitation while serving in the clinic. That prepared me to work with the 12-step programs at Mount Manresa.

What was your next step on this journey?

In 1983, I was invited to be part of the staff on a full-time basis. I was hired to build up midweek programs. This was a successful experience, though not that rewarding spiritually. I visited different schools to promote midweek retreats for youth. I also attended senior citizens' meetings to let them know we were beginning days of prayer for older people. At the same time, one of the Jesuits fell ill, and I was quickly added to the weekend retreat staff.

How did that ministry challenge you and enrich your life?

This was one of the greatest joys of my life. I found that the God I was hungering for was in the very people who came to Manresa. That was a very humbling experience, one that I will never forget.

Can you describe particular satisfactions you experienced?

My greatest joy came when we had our first of many HIV/AIDS retreats. I was very comfortable with people in

this situation, having met them in the methadone clinic. Many of these clients were dying because the medicines were not yet found. We offered them Reiki, and that was a grace. "No one ever touches me" was a familiar reaction. When we prayed or meditated with them, we discovered unsuspected relationships they had with God. Envious!

In the early days, our associates cooked and cleaned because the Manresa staff members were afraid of the disease and were sure they were going to be at risk. Fortunately, a new director came, and his message was, "Be here or be fired." We had no more problems, just a few educative moments.

How long were you at Mount Manresa?

Thirty years. I began as the only woman on the staff, along with nine Jesuits. By my last year there, the Jesuits were gone and I was considered "the last man standing."

What was your childhood like?

As for my childhood, I had great parents. They were loving and strict at the same time. I had polio, and when I was sufficiently able to respond to the opportunity, my parents enrolled me in a YMCA for girls, where I learned to swim. They bought me a secondhand bike to ride to school. I had an amazing recovery.

We always had friends over, and on weekends, the larger family of aunts, uncles and grandparents often came to visit and have the usual card game.

Where did you attend school?

My favorite school was St. Michael's in Flushing, N.Y. I followed my father, aunts and uncle to a Catholic high school, but later transferred to William Cullen Bryant High, where I did just fine.

What brought you to religious life?

I entered the convent in 1953 with the intention of trying it out. My boyfriend and I had a code to write each other, and that went well until the mistress of novices found out about it. She challenged me to let go of him and stay the course at least a year. Needless to say, she was a very wise woman, because here I am 60 years later.

Many of us who entered the convent around that time had a different expectation about our service than the years offered us. Is that true in your case?

I knew I had to be a classroom teacher and probably give music lessons after school. What was missing was the intimate prayer life I thought I would have. I didn't realize then that I was in a perfect place to meet God. I was in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. This was a little fishing and farming town, one of the poorest places one could find. I visited homes that had no icebox and realized that I was teaching children who had to work on the farm in the early morning before coming to school. This was far from anything I expected, but again, God was teaching me.

I wrote to my family asking for clothes for the children who had so little. They, with their friends, had a session of bingo with all proceeds used to buy the needed clothing. They sent shoes, socks and other items they purchased, but they didn't send money they feared wouldn't help the children. How wise they were!

What you describe came as a heartbreaking surprise to many of us who grew up in relatively stable homes. We continue to learn as we age, don't we?

Yes. My education continues as I've been privileged to have been called by God to start the first group of associates in our congregation. This was quite a journey because it took a long while to be accepted. I have been

with the associates since 1983 informally but formally 1992. These women and men share our charism and bring the love of God into the world they live in. In Staten Island, there are several associates, and one group of 15 meets at our home once a month.

What you're describing parallels that of our Mercy community. We have eight women and three men who meet with us in our convent each month. The movement seems to growing in many religious communities.

We have grown so much that we now have associates as director and assistant director. I attend the meetings and offer prayerful encouragement. Three associates were on the preaching team at Manresa, and we are now in the process of creating a workshop on the women saints of New York: Elizabeth Seton, Mother Cabrini and Dorothy Day.

Was there any particular program you are pleased to have initiated at Mount Manresa?

I started the lay preachers program because we were losing so many Jesuits. The program I created included Passionist Fr. Victor Hoagland, who taught them how to preach effectively. Several of our staff learned how to mentor them. The program lasted a year, after which the newly instructed no longer needed us. You know, when you do a good job, you do yourself out of a job. That was our experience.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

"Do justice, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God" is my favorite Scripture passage, and my image of God at this point is not an image but a sound -- the sound of a perfect F natural. This probably sounds strange, but it is true. I find God in music -- not hymns, primarily, but pieces from Brahms, Wagner, Beethoven and Mozart, to name a few.

What else influenced your belief system?

My belief system is grounded from the natural to the supernatural. A newborn baby, nature in its seasons, animals, and so many other things that speak to me of a loving magnificent God so close that we fail sometimes to recognize at whom we are looking.

Do you live alone?

I live with another sister, Grazyna Michniewicz. Grazyna was a nurse in the methadone clinic when we met, and I became her supervisor. After 22 years there, she decided on a new path. She became a Sister of Charity of Halifax almost 40 years ago, and we share community. She teaches at Monsignor Farrell High School.

How do you pray?

I pray as I walk our dogs, a poodle shih-poo and a Bichon. We rescued these two dogs, along with three cats, when nobody wanted them.

As I walk the dogs, I ponder my favorite mantra, "May all that is you flow into me." Sometimes, I just sit and breathe my prayer or listen to a piece of music. Psalms are important, as are Scripture passages.

Now that you are 78, what are your plans for the future?

As for future plans, I leave that up to God.

Fair enough. Less fair is the fact that only after our conversation was signed, sealed and delivered did I discover you've been the recipient of numerous awards for a range of services. Which have meant the most to you?

I was happy to share an honor with television personality Katie Couric and four others as a winner of a Woman of Achievement Award in 2004 in a celebration of six lives well-lived.

I was honored as New York City's Citizen of the Year in 2002, a year after the attack on 9/11, in recognition of my presence in the aftermath of the tragedy.

The photo you sent at our request identifies you as offering a presentation and prayer near the site of 9/11. That led to my discovering that you have long served as a chaplain for the police department and Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). Why were you chosen to address the gathering?

I've been involved with the police department since 1994. I was selected to give the talk and lead the prayer service the day that photo was taken, the 10th anniversary of 9/11, because I was one of the first responders to that tragedy. I spent quite a bit of time at the World Trade Center and landfill. I counseled people there as well as those who came for spiritual help to Mount Manresa.

Are you currently engaged in any particular justice concerns?

My involvement in justice issues comes in praying. I do not have the energy I had at one time to attend meetings, but I do write and sign petitions when I deem it important to protest issues of poverty, including the abuse and trafficking of women and children.

What causes you sorrow?

All the above in my justice issues cause me sorrow, along with war and the loss of loved ones. Still, joy is much a part of my life.

What gives you hope?

My hope is a passion for what is possible, though I may not live to see it: possible in the church, possible in the world and the knowledge that God is in charge all the time. That, I pray, will lead to greater inclusion of women as leaders of prayer and possibly as priests.

Does Pope Francis hold out any hope for the realization of your wishes?

I think Pope Francis is wonderful! He's put the women's issue on hold, but I hope he will have enlightenment about that, too.

And so, Maureen, we conclude with hope in our hearts. Thank you.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, [is available](#) [1] from Now You Know Media.]

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